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A Republican Reversal on Nicaragua

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WASHINGTON, April 10 — Even before most people knew what was really going on in Nicaragua, Senator John H. Chafee supported President Reagan's policy there.

The Central Intelligence Agency's mining of Nicaragua's harbors, the guerrilla warfare manual advising Nicaraguan rebels on political assassination, the charges that the American-backed rebels were torturing and murdering numerous unarmed civilians — none of that provoked Mr. Chafee, a Rhode Island Republican, to change his vote.

But no more. Mr. Reagan has finally lost that vote. An analysis of how Mr. Chafee reached that decision may help explain why the White House concluded that it probably could not persuade Congress to renew aid to the rebels without accompanying the request with a new Central American proposal.

New Proposal on April 4

That move, made April 4, proposed making further aid to the rebels non-military, providing the governing Sandinistas would agree to negotiate with the rebels.

But even that may not swing the issue for Mr. Reagan if Mr. Chafee's reaction is typical. He says he was not moved.

As the Senator sees things, it is not he who has changed position. Rather, he contends, it is the Administration.

As evidence, he cites Mr. Reagan's



Paul Conklin

Senator John H. Chafee

saying he supported overthrowing the Nicaraguan Government, someone at the White House had come forward and explained "that's not what he really meant." But not after Feb. 21, at least not as far as Mr. Chafee could determine.

As a result, he said, he had no intention of returning to Mr. Reagan's side on the Nicaragua issue. Nor was he impressed, he added, by the President's offer last week.

Why is Chafee position important?

The Margin Is Narrow

The last time the Senate voted on aid to the rebels, the White House won by four votes. Since then, Senator Dave Durenberger, a Minnesota Republican, has indicated that he would vote no if asked again. Meanwhile, the elections in November gave the Democrats two additional seats in the Senate.

It may be that some opponents have changed their view as a result of Mr. Reagan's call for negotiations. Still, it is clear that every vote counts.

Further, Mr. Chafee is in many ways a key Senator on the Central America. He was a member of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence for eight years until January. That meant he had the opportunity to read even the most secret intelligence information about the rebel program.

He is generally described as a mod-

erate Republican. That means the White House cannot count on his vote on every issue, and it must be worked for.

Mr. Chafee said he initially had no difficulty supporting the Administration's rationale, that the rebels could be used to intercept arms shipments going from Nicaragua to El Salvador's insurgents.

"Then they broadened it," he said, "saying the rebels were to be a burr in the Sandinistas' saddle, to encourage them to participate in peace talks. I thought, well, O.K. It was a little fuzzy but clearly had nothing to do with overthrowing the Government."

Last spring, when the Central Intelligence Agency was implicated in the mining of Nicaragua's harbors, the Senator began to have doubts but continued to back Mr. Reagan.

The Guerrilla Manual

Last fall, when the intelligence agency acknowledged it had been responsible for a guerrilla warfare manual advising the rebels to "neutralize" selected Sandinista officials and to blackmail ordinary Nicaraguan to join the rebel cause, he took note. But, "Frankly it didn't bother me very much," he says.

This year, when several private organizations published reports charging the rebels with widespread atrocities, far in excess of what might be expected in war, the Senator "didn't like" the implications of the reports but his mind was not changed. "It's

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"watershed" news conference on Feb. 21. Mr. Reagan said then his goal in Central America was to "remove" the present Nicaraguan Government unless "they'd say uncle."

White House Amends It

"That was going way further than anything I had bargained for," Mr. Chafee said, explaining his change of heart. "I don't care what kind of government Nicaragua has, as long as they leave their neighbors alone."

Until then, the Senator added, each time Mr. Reagan had come close to

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very hard to confirm or deny that it is really going on," he explained.

In all, Mr. Chafee said, he believed the C.I.A. and the rebel program, despite problems, were "serving a useful purpose" in Nicaragua, right up to Feb. 21.

"I fell off the bandwagon," the Senator said. And now that he has made his intentions known, he added, he cannot be persuaded to change his mind again. "This wasn't just a flash decision," he said. "I have thought this thing through."

The big unanswered question is how many other legislators are thinking on the same lines.

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